Building the Relationship Between Home and School at Back-to-School Time

Tools and Advice for District Success

By TeacherLists Content Team

In today's changing educational landscape, district and school administrators are well aware of the importance of communication both to families and community members throughout the year. Educators know that in this time of expanded educational choices and freedom, families are now more like customers who need to be sold on a school's product and promise.

Many schools are hiring PR professionals and establishing a position internally for a school communicator to focus on selling their school to families and the community, and they know that when developing a communication plan, back-to-school is the most important time of the year—it's when all eyes and minds in the community are on schools.

But it can be challenging to figure out how best to take advantage of this once-a-year opportunity. This reference guide helps explain to school professionals:

- why communication with families is key during back-to-school
- important information to communicate during back-to-school
- how to develop a communication framework
- how to find and use the right technology

We've also included a list of some great technology tools that will really help you communicate with families!

Why Communication With Families Is Key During Back-to-School

School-parent communication is a year-round strategy and effort, but back-to-school time is pivotal for that continued success. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, some 56.6 million students attended elementary and secondary school in the U.S. in fall 2018—that's a lot of families to connect with!

It's essentially your district product launch.

The opening of school is when parents are introduced (or reintroduced) to your team, your messaging, and your brand. What they see at back-to-school events, read in newsletters, and hear discussed in meetings and orientations will influence them for the rest of the year. First impressions do matter, and if your communications are flawed or in disarray, it can take a while to change that image.

It's also like your first date.

Getting the message to families and the community that your school is a success—and also emphasizing that this is largely because of *them*—should be communicated early and often. You don't want families just to be impressed by your school system; you want them to want to be a *part* of it. Parents who partner with their child's school not only support the school, but also offer tangible benefits to the students there. The benefits of parent involvement in schools (across all levels—elementary, middle school, and high school) include improved grades and test scores, better attitudes about school, and improved work completion and participation.

It's the time when all eyes are on schools.

From statistics on shopping and enrollment numbers to feel-good stories about school supply drives and welcome-back traditions, the news is full of reports and information about schools at back-to-school time—so it's the best time to sell your school not only to families, but also to the community.

You have all summer to prepare.

We know that no teacher or administrator gets "summer off." However, there *is* more time to focus on strategic efforts with your district and school staff, including evaluating your communications: updating your website, exploring new technologies, painting the halls, and looking into opportunities to learn what others are doing to increase their success.

There's so much information—you have to grab attention.

The bottom line is, back-to-school means an onslaught of communication to parents. Beyond school and district communications, they're being approached from every direction: athletic teams, bands, before- and after-school programs, art classes, and clubs. If your communication isn't simple and attention-grabbing, parents miss it (or they'll choose to overlook it).

Important Information To Communicate During Back-to-School

Every district and school will have different and specific programs they want to promote, but there are some basic and necessary pieces of information that are common everywhere. Delivering such information the right way will get your relationship with parents off to a positive start.

Make sure they know who and where you are.

Before you can communicate with anyone, they need to know how to find you. It's important to make sure families know your office hours, contact information, website, and social media handles. More specifically, they'll also need to know how to sign up for parent group and school distribution lists and class websites. This type of information is frequently stuck at the bottom of an email or letter home; finding ways to make it stand out is key to really reaching parents and community members.

Relay the ground rules.

School start time, early release days, the dress code, when buses arrive, rules on technology—this is all important information for families and even some members of the community. Plan to have this kind of information readily available and easily findable on a website or in a handbook.

Make the logistics clear.

Sometimes paperwork about school logistics—what school supplies are needed for the classroom, how parents can pay for school lunch, what health forms are required by state law—is overwhelming, so make it a priority to deliver this information as clearly as possible.

Don't forget extracurriculars and events.

You also need to communicate about optional programs like before- and after-school care or orientation nights and back-to-school family programming. This type of information might not be state-mandated, but it's critical to building engagement and relationships.

Go the extra mile.

In recent years, schools have embraced the idea of supporting students not only academically, but also with other services. Writing and sharing expert advice on relevant topics like back-to-school organization or healthy lunch ideas helps build a trusting relationship with families and shows that the district supports the whole health of its students.

Developing a Communication Framework

Communicating this much information can be overwhelming for districts, and parents feel the same way on the receiving end. But there are a few things schools can do to use each communication opportunity to successfully build relationships with families and communities. The first is to create a framework for outreach.

Decide how to distribute the wealth of information.

A first communication priority for school districts is often deciding which information should come from the district and which from individual schools. It's important to ensure that rules, schedules, announcements, contact information, and other resources are readily available in district and school offices and on their websites. It makes sense for school-specific information to be distributed from schools and common announcements that apply across the town from the district, but sometimes it also makes sense to reshare the information across alternate channels to reiterate the message.

For example, if a grade school wins an award, having the district share a congratulations and details with families across town is completely appropriate to build community support of the education system. Likewise, if the district is implementing new security measures across all the schools, each individual school should also notify families that this is happening and how and when it will take place at their school. Coordinating these messages is key to unified outreach.

Be organized around where, what, and when.
While it's great to have information in multiple places, the department in charge of communicating this data needs to keep careful track of where it is, who's in charge of it at each level, and when it's being distributed. It gives parents a negative impression when they come across incorrect data or expired information, and it can reflect poorly on the school system as a whole.

Timing is everything. Or is it?
Communicating with families over the summer and during back-to-school presents challenges. Everyone has different vacation times, and many people ignore anything school-related until the week before it starts again—it's impossible to figure out when is "best" to reach people. And as more millennials become public school parents, districts are going to need to meet those younger parents where they are. This might mean a little more planning on districts' part, but the key to reaching families is to layer the messages. Take school supplies, for example—supply lists are key information that parents need to have before their kids go back to school.

Here's an example of a "layered" approach to communicate with parents about school supplies:

1. Have your lists available on your website at the end of the school year. Note the website address for all the school and district lists in an email, newsletter, or letter home at the end of the year.

2. Add a link or banner link to all the supply lists on the district or school site (or both).

3. At some point mid-summer, send an email to parents with the supply list link.

4. Have your PTO send out a few reminders and links in their newsletter or social channels over the summer.

5. Send another blast email with last-minute reminders the week before school starts with a link to the lists. Include similar reminders on social media on the days leading up to the first day of school.

This plan does a few things: It announces the issue, it places the information in an easily accessible location, and it reminds parents several times where they can find the information when they're ready. While not every challenge can be addressed with these exact steps, a similar approach will allow you to reach the majority of your parents where and when they want to be reached.

Be clear, be concise, and be uncomplicated.
These days, most parents are busy no matter their job, hobbies, or number of children. The best thing you can do is make the information easy to find, read, and find again. A central back-to-school page on your website can be the sales hook you need—one place, all the information (or at least links to it), and an easy-to-browse format will have families thanking you all year. Below are examples of school districts that have developed these back-to-school pages.

Metro Nashville Public Schools: This Tennessee district prepares a special back-to-school section with information about school supply lists, transportation, contacts, calendars, subsidized lunch, and health. There's also a section called "What's New" and a link to FAQs.

West Orange Public Schools: Leaders in West Orange, N.J., include a Parents page on their website with information like the anti-bullying policy, a parent handbook, supply lists, new student forms, a parent portal link, and daily schedules across the district.

Just keep getting out there.
Making a consistent effort to reach families where they're at is an important part of your overall communication strategy.

-**Social media** is currently used by 80 percent of people from ages 19 to 49. Many districts and schools already have active social media presences via district accounts, specific teachers, or parent groups that families rely on for getting their information. Sometimes schools just need to dress up their communications a bit with some fun graphics to grab attention and get their message out.

-**Tap into the power of parent involvement.** Parents who are involved are more invested in a school's success and feel more loyalty to the school. They're more likely to be advocates for it in the community when they view themselves as part of the "team." Cultivating that relationship with parents can be challenging, but it's important—89 percent of parents of students in kindergarten through 12th grade report attending school or PTO meetings, so often just it's a matter of encouraging more involvement. One great resource for this is PTO Today. Their site offers numerous resources for you to share with your school's PTO or PTA, including specific back-to-school resources: setting up events, coordinating supply list communication, and more.

Finding and Using the Right Technology

Finding the right technology to help best communicate with families can be a challenge. Below are a few things to keep in mind when evaluating technology, some resources your school district can use as a reference, and a few areas where technology can make all the difference during back-to-school.

When evaluating technology, there's no such thing as a ridiculous question.
It may take you a while to select which technology is a good fit for your school or for the particular challenge you're looking to solve. Making a proper evaluation means learning the ins and outs of the new system—which means asking questions like how the technology will change the way you're handling tasks now, how it will evolve over time, what type of support and training you'll get, and beyond enhancing efficiency, how it's a sound financial investment for your school. Take your time and ask for references or examples of districts similar in size and with similar goals that have experience with the technology you're considering.

Decide what's most important.
There are many technology choices for communicating with families, but there are a few areas to really consider during back-to-school time. See below for a list of those areas plus a few leading technology applications and resources that can help.

-**Tech management systems** help by handling the integration of other technologies and applications seamlessly. Examples of school management systems or technology platforms include Blackboard, PowerSchool, or Rediker. When schools are looking for help with challenges like payment processing, school supply lists, fundraising campaigns, and sending home digital communications that parents won't miss, they can usually recommend a technology solution to help.

-**Payment processing platforms** securely handle payments for lunch accounts, fundraising, and other circumstances, and are simple to use and manage. Some examples are eFunds for Schools and MySchoolBucks.

-**School supply shopping** can be the ultimate misery for parents at back-to-school but TeacherLists has made the entire process of creating, sharing, and shopping easy for schools and families. This free service posts uploaded lists for schools and districts they work with and provides links and banners for social media and school websites. Then parents can order online through convenient one-click shopping or run out and pick up what they need at their local store.

-**Classroom messenger apps** make life much easier for parents, especially those with multiple children, because they won't miss important information from the school or district. It also makes managing the application much easier for the district—everyone's on one system, sharing the same way. Examples of these include reminder applications like Remind or a learning journal like Seesaw that every classroom can use.

-**Digital communication systems** like Peachjar, Smore, and PermissionClick allow your district to communicate important information to parents digitally, saving the hassle of copying and distributing thousands of newsletters and flyers annually.

There's no one-size-fits-all strategy when it comes to creating and building relationships with families at back-to-school time. But an approach that includes direct, planned, and friendly communication along with some strategic technology solutions can make a huge difference in school perception and parent engagement—at a time when your school has the chance to make a great impression.

About TeacherLists: TeacherLists is a free, ADA compliant and easy-to-use online solution that helps thousands of schools efficiently manage and share back-to-school supply lists with parents—and with direct links to national online retailers like Target, Walmart, and Amazon, TeacherLists makes shopping for supplies easier than ever for parents! Visit www.TeacherLists.com/NSPRA for more information.

Cool tools to check out:

Remind		PermissionClick		MySchoolBucks	
TeacherLists		SchoolInfoApp		Doodle	
Peachjar		Nutrislice		TalkingPoints	
Smore		eFunds for Schools		Animoto	